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S E C R E T ROME 003632

SIPDIS

E.O. 12958: DECL: 10/27/2015

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SUBJECT: PM BERLUSCONI'S FOCUS WILL BE IRAQ TROOP LEVELS

Classified By: Ambassador Ronald Spogli for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d).

1. (U) The Ambassador called on PM Silvio Berlusconi on the eve of Berlusconi's trip to Washington for his meeting with POTUS. Berlusconi was accompanied by Under Secretary for the Council of Ministers Gianni Letta, Special Assistant Valentino Valenti, Diplomatic Counselor Gianpaolo Scarante and Minister for EU Policy Giorgio LaMalfa.

2. (S) The Ambassador asked Berlusconi what major issues he wished to cover in his October 31 meeting with the President. Berlusconi, who is already fully engaged in national campaigns scheduled for next spring, said he wants to discuss a "success strategy" in Iraq. He continued that Italy has rotated many soldiers through Iraq with relatively few serious incidents and none recently.

3. (S) Berlusconi said he wants to begin a reduction of troops. His goal is to have fewer troops in Iraq (currently 2,982) by the April 9, 2006 national elections than Italy now has stationed in either Kosovo (3,006) or Afghanistan (2,172). Berlusconi wants Iraq to be the smallest of the three peacekeeping missions.

4. (S) The Ambassador pressed on other issues Berlusconi might wish to raise and questioned whether Italy would be able to maintain its overseas troop commitments in light of proposed cuts to the defense budget. Berlusconi waived aside the concern and repeated that the only significant issue he wishes to discuss with POTUS is a "success strategy" for Iraq.

5. (SBU) In his public statements, the Italian PM repeatedly declined to be pinned down on any timetable for troop reductions. He has said only that he would be discussing Iraq with POTUS and that any changes would be gradual and fully agreed among allies in Iraq and with the government of Iraq. His formulation has been to speak in terms of a "success strategy" that will move Iraq further toward a stable democracy, not an "exit strategy."
SPOGLI